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California officials bracing for uproar over fire-protection fee

A week before California begins mailing notices to 825,488 rural property owners that they face paying a new fire-protection fee, state officials are bracing for a flood of angry responses and some are predicting the charge will end up being challenged in court.

The state Board of Equalization plans to begin sending out notices next week, and mail the first bills Aug. 13. Board Vice Chair Michelle Steel said this week that she objects to the fee and "will not be surprised to see this unconstitutional fire tax in the courts soon after bills are sent."



Although the first notices have not yet gone out, county officials are also anticipating an uproar and have taken pains to point out that they had nothing to do with identifying the habitable structures to be hit with the \$150 annual fee.

"Neither California counties nor assessors helped in compiling the list of names and addresses of persons for which the 'fire fee' is to be imposed," said a statement by the Regional Council of Rural Counties. The council noted that the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection identified buildings subject to the fee based on being located in wooded and brushy areas deemed requiring special fire protection.

Assemblyman Paul Cook (R- Yucca Valley) also sought to get ahead of the upcoming firestorm from his constituents over the tax approved by the Legislature, even though he voted against it. Cook noted in a statement that 65,000 structures will be hit with the fee in San Bernardino County, and he wanted property owners to know he had nothing to do with it.

"As a rural Californian, I'm deeply troubled that the governor is rolling out his fire tax on rural residents under the false banner of providing fire protection," Cook said in a statement this week.

-- Patrick McGreevy in Sacramento